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THE CONDOR A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN ORNITHOLOGY.



Volume VII

January-February, 1905

Number 1

Photographing the Aerie of a Western Red-tail

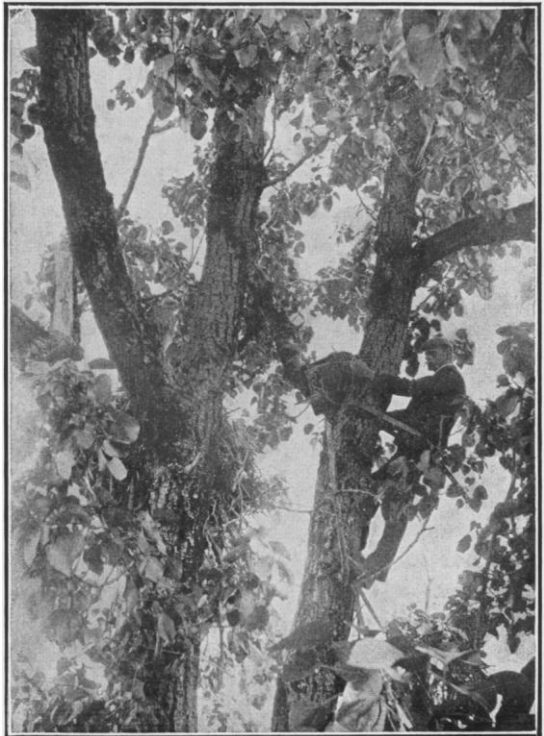
BY WILLIAM LOVELL FINLEY

ILLUSTRATED BY HERMAN T. BOHLMAN

IF there is another red-tail in the county that has found a nesting site higher than the one in the cottonwood over the bank of the Columbia river, we have never seen it. A red-tail likes a high commanding site just as a mallard searches the sedge grass about the pond for a home. This pair of hawks surely found it. We would never have discovered the aerie, had we not searched the bottom when the trees were leafless.

Finding a red-tail's nest is very different in Oregon from what it is in California. You may look through the forest of tall firs till you are blind, or search the river bottoms for miles and not find the trace of a nest. But it seems that every little canyon of the California hills has its red-tail, and all you have to do to find a nest is to sit at the outlet and scan the trees with your field glass.

We have found few nests that are absolutely beyond human touch, but it has taken a deal of



PHOTOGRAPHER AT WORK, 120 FT. FROM THE GROUND



YOUNG RED-TAILED HAWKS FULLY FLEDGED, MAY 24TH

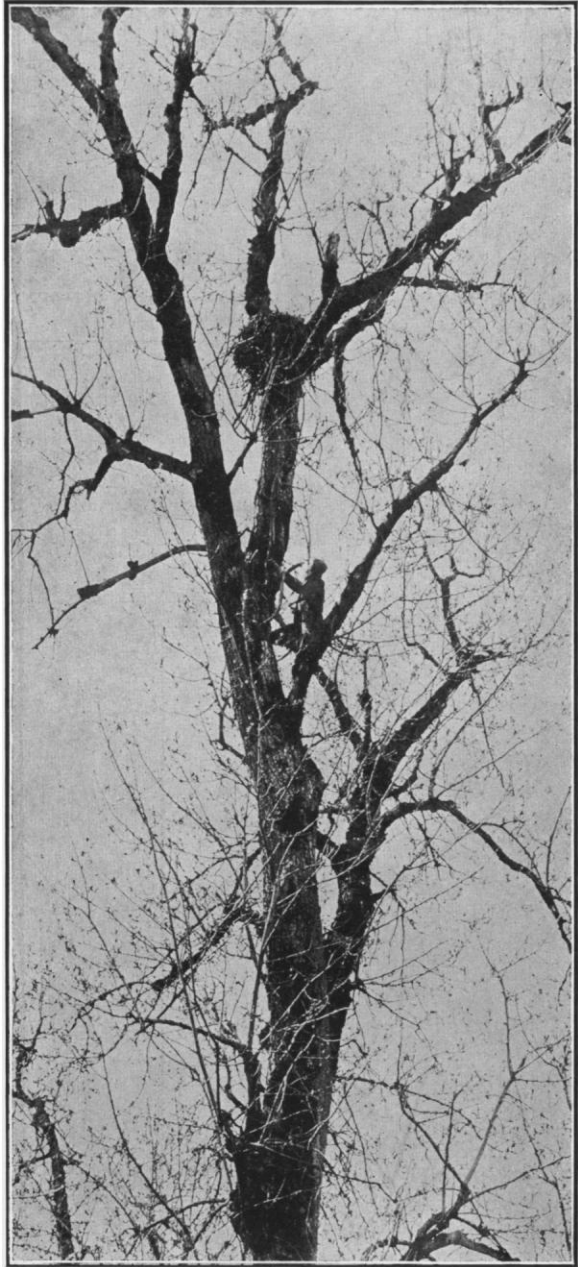
Photographed by Herman T. Bohlman

scheming and a risk of life and limb to reach some of them. We schemed for three different summers after we found this aerie of the red-tail before we finally succeeded in leveling our camera at the eggs. The nest-tree measured over fourteen feet around at the bottom. There was not a limb for forty feet. The nest itself was lodged just one hundred and twenty feet up. It was out of the question to clamber up such a tree with climbers, ropes, or anything else, but we had another plan.

We had spotted a young cottonwood just fifteen feet away. This might serve as a ladder so we chopped at the base till it began to totter. With ropes we pulled it over. The crown lodged in the branches of the first large limb of the nest-tree full forty feet up. This formed a shaky aerial bridge, up which we clambered a third of a distance to the nest. The anticipation led us on. We lassoed upper branches, dug our climbing-irons into the bark and worked slowly up.

We found a stack of sticks the size of a small haystack. They were not pitched together helter-skelter. A big nest like a hawk's or heron's always gives me the impression that it is easily thrown together. I examined this one and found it as carefully woven as a wicker basket. It was strong at every point. Sticks over a yard in length and some as big as your wrist were all worked into a compact mass. In the hollowed top on some bark and leaves lay the two eggs.

I never saw a more commanding stronghold. It over looked the country for miles in every direction. From where the hawk-mother brooded her eggs I looked out far up the Columbia, and I

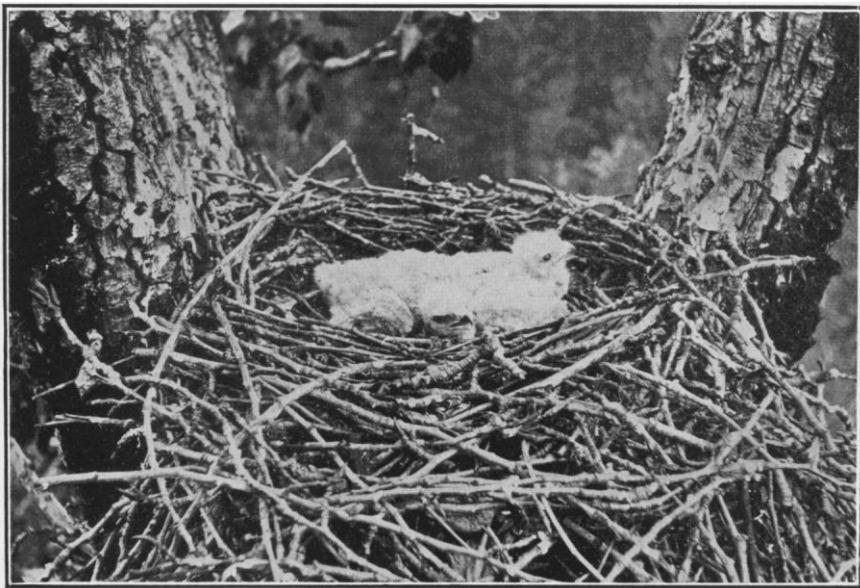


POSITION OF NEST, SHOWING OPPOSITE LIMB FROM WHICH PHOTOGRAPHER WORKED



APRIL 15TH, THE TWO EGGS

could see the cavern-cut slopes of Mt. Hood. Extending to the westward, was the long line of ponds and lakes, the redbill's favorite hunting ground, while to the north lay the broad expanse of water and in the distance loomed up the dome-like peak of St. Helens, covered with perpetual snow.



YOUNG IN DOWNY STATE, MAY 3RD

How could we ever secure a good series of pictures at such a distance from the ground? It looked impossible at first, but a careful examination revealed a rare arrangement of nests and surroundings. If we could but hoist our equipment there was no question as to photographs. Eight feet below the aerie the trunk of the tree branched and spread in such a way that we could climb to a point just above the nest on the opposite limb. We strapped the camera in a crotch that seemed built for the purpose, with the sun coming from the right direction. The rub came in focusing the instrument. One hundred and twenty feet is not such a dizzy height when you stand on the ground and look up, but strap yourself to the limb of a tree and dangle out backward over the brink. No matter how strong the

rope, there's a feeling of death creeping up and down every nerve in your body the first time you try it.

The eggs of some hawks differ widely in marking, but the two we found in the cottonwood year after year were always of a bluish white tint, with pale lavender shell markings. The mother cradles her two eggs just about the first of April before the first buds begin to swell on the cottonwoods. The spring of 1902 the young birds hatched on April 20th. The picture of the birds in down was taken on May third. The third photograph was taken on May 18th, when the heads were still covered with downy white but the bodies were well feathered out. The fourth picture of the series was taken on May 24th when the young were almost full grown (frontispiece). On the first day of June both the young hawks left the nest. This makes the period almost two months to the day from the time the eggs are laid till the youngsters make their debut in-



AT THE BASE OF THE HAWK TREE

to the world.

We made a close study of the red-tail's home in the tall cottonwood. He was always a successful hunter. In all our visits we never saw the time when his larder was empty. Nor did we find that we had to resort to the chicken yard for food. There was plenty of wild game. On the first visits we found the remains of quail and pheasants in the aerie. One morning we saw the mangled body of a screech owl; almost a case of hawk eat hawk. Later in the season when the banks of the Columbia overflowed, and covered most of the surrounding country, the old hawk did not abandon his own preserve. He turned his attention entirely to fishing. Where

the carp and catfish fed about the edges of the ponds he had no trouble in catching plenty to eat. Twice we found carp over a foot in length in the aerie. On our last visit we picked up the head bones of seven catfish in the nest.

The wild life of the red-tail fascinates me. He has an individuality that is as interesting as a person. He has a character as clearly marked as in any feathered creature I ever studied. The bleak winter winds that sweep the valley of the Columbia and drive the other birds to the southland, never bother him. This is his permanent home. He is not a vagabond. He is local in attachments and habits.



MAY 18TH. PARTLY FEATHERED

This is his hunting ground. He won it by years of defence. He beats over the field and along the edge of the woods as regularly as the fishman casts his net. He has his favorite perch. He watches the pond as closely for carp as the farmer watches his orchard. His routine of life is as marked as any inhabitant along the river. Nor can I believe he is lacking in the sentiment of home. He adds sticks to his house and enlarges it year by year. Who can say that the old aerie is not fraught with many hawk memories of the past? ^a

Portland, Oregon.

^a The photographs which illustrate this article are protected by copyright. The hawk here referred to is *Buteo borealis calurus*.